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ABSTRACT

Differences in children's interpersonal perceptions and in their conceptions of behavior disorders in hypothetical peers were investigated in a sample of 34 boys between the ages of 10 and 13. Two groups of subjects were formed: 17 subjects attended special classes for the emotionally handicapped and were classified as exhibiting conduct problems while another 17 attended regular classrooms. Two story vignettes depicting behavior disorders in hypothetical peers were read to each subject. The vignettes described peers as exhibiting behavior problems of the "undercontrolled" (i.e., acting out, oppositional behaviors) and of the "overcontrolled" (i.e., passivity-withdrawal, isolation). After hearing the two vignettes, subjects rated the two story characters on a social desirability scale and also indicated the extent to which situational or dispositional causal attribution statements accounted for the characters' behaviors. Results indicated that the two groups differed significantly in their social evaluations and causal attributions. Youngsters in the problem group were significantly more negative in their evaluations of the undercontrolled character than were their peers in the regular classroom. The overcontrolled character was rated overall as being significantly more positive than was the undercontrolled character. While both subject groups made higher situational ratings for the undercontrolled versus the overcontrolled story character, subjects in the problem group made significantly higher situational ratings for both story characters than did their peers in the regular classroom. (RH)

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A Study Of Differences In Pre-Adolescent Boys' Interpersonal Perceptions and Social Adjustment

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, an increasing number of researchers have become interested in the study of children's development of cognitive processes for interpreting, understanding, and evaluating the social environment and the behavior of other persons. Empirical investigations of children's "social cognition" have examined processes assumed to constitute social reasoning such as role-taking, empathy, person perception, and causal attribution (Chandler, 1977; Forbes, 1978). Despite this increased interest in social-cognitive research, there have been few attempts to extend these efforts to the study of differences among children in school or clinic settings (Kitano, Stiehl, & Cole, 1978; Selman, 1976). Shantz (1975) and Santostefano (1980), among others, have urged a greater recognition by developmental researchers of the potential relevance of investigations of children's social cognition for the field of clinical child psychology.

The study reported here investigated differences in children's interpersonal perception and in their conceptions of behavior disorders in hypothetical peers. Specifically, the study examined the processes of social evaluation and causal attribution among "Conduct Problem" (Quay & Werry, 1979) and "non-problem" children within the context of their social reasoning about observed behavior disorders in hypothetical peers.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

Thirty-four boys between the ages of 10 and 13 participated in the present study. The "Problem Group" (PG) consisted of 17 boys selected from special education classes for the "Emotionally Handicapped" located in three Saratoga County, New York school districts. The districts serve predominantly white, middle-class communities. From the available pool of boys enrolled in the classes, the Problem Group (PG) was selected from among those whose case histories, referral records, and current school behavior indicated a primary behavior problem of the "Conduct Problem" type (Quay & Werry, 1979). A subject nomination procedure was also employed whereby the school psychologist and teacher serving each special class rated each student against criteria describing three patterns of childhood maladjustment : "Personality Problem" (e.g., passive-withdrawal), "Hyperkinetic" (e.g., distractable, attention-deficit), and "Conduct Problem" (e.g., disruptive behavior, hostile-aggressive). Only those students classified as "Conduct Problem" by both raters were eligible for participation in the study.

A second sample of 17 boys was selected from regular classrooms serving students between the ages of 10 and 13 (Grades 5 and 6), to serve as the "Non-Problem Group" (NP) in the study. All subjects in both groups were Caucasians. Only those students demonstrating at least average-range psychometric ability (IQ < 75)

were eligible for selection in each group. Appropriate criterion measures for IQ were employed (e.g., WISC-R, Stanford-Binet). Parent permission was obtained for all subjects.

Procedure

All subjects were administered the two experimental tasks individually by the author. The tasks were originally developed in pilot research and later refined in a separate instrumentation study with a sample of 144 children in grades four through six. Scale reliabilities and factor structures are reported in the full report.

Story Vignettes. Preceeding the adminstration of the experimental tasks, each subject was read aloud two story vignettes depicting behavior disorders in hypothetical peers. Hypothetical peers exhibiting behavior problems of the "under-controlled" (i.e., acting-out, oppositional) and "overcontrolled" (i.e., passive-withdrawn, isolated) types were described in the vignettes in accordance with the methodologies employed in previous research on normal children's conceptions of behavior disorders (Coie & Pennington, 1976; Maas, Marecek, & Travers, 1978; Marsden & Kalter, 1976). Both vignettes were originally adapted from similar stories found in the studies just noted, and were piloted on three samples of children similar to those participating in the main study. The vignettes can be found in Appendix A.

Task #1. In Experimental Task #1, the "Social Evaluation Task (SET), each subject completed a "Social Desirability Scale" consisting of nine bi-polar adjective dimensions. Subjects rated the two story characters along the dimensions supplied on a five point Likert-type scale, with the order of the dimensions being randomized over subjects. The purpose of the SET was to demonstrate differences in the social evaluations made by the Problem and Non-Problem youngsters with regard to observed behavior disorders in hypothetical peers. A copy of the SET appears in Appendix B.

Task #2. In Experimental Task #2, the "Causal Attribution Task" (CAT), each subject produced ratings of the extent to which they perceived each of 15 causal attribution statements as accounting for the behaviors depicted in the story vignettes. Subjects' ratings were made on a five point Likert-type scale. Ten statements indicative of "situational" (i.e., external causes) or "dispositional" (i.e., internal causes) attributions were rated by the subjects. An additional five statements were included in the CAT as a validity check on possible response set variance (Brown, 1976; Wiggins, 1973), yielding a total of 15 statements to be rated by the subjects. The purpose of the CAT was to demonstrate differences in the causal attributions made by the Problem and Non-Problem youngsters with regard to observed behavior disorders in hypothetical peers. A copy of the CAT appears in Appendix C.

RESULTS

Social Evaluation Task (SET)

Subjects' social evaluation ratings on the nine bi-polars comprising the SET were analyzed within a repeated measures analysis of variance model. Subjects' mean scale scores (ratings) on the SET were used as dependent measures in a 2 (subject group) X 2 (story vignette) ANOVA with repeated measures on the vignette factor. These analyses examined differences between the Problem and Non-Problem groups in their social evaluations concerning the behavior disorders depicted in the story vignettes. In addition, the degree to which the subjects' ratings were affected by the kind of behavior disorder being considered was examined. A number of specific research hypotheses were investigated.

Analysis of SET ratings. The means and standard deviations for the SET ratings made by both groups in the two story conditions appear in Table 1. An analysis of variance indicated significant main effects for subject group, F (1,32) = 7.62, $p < .009$, and story vignette, F (1,32) = 125.76, $p < .0001$. The group by story interaction was not significant, F (1,32) = 1.17, N.S.

These initial results indicate that on the whole the Problem Group rated the story characters more negatively than did the Non-Problem Group. The effect for story vignette indicated that the "undercontrolled" character was rated more negatively overall than the "overcontrolled" character. Given the significant

Table 1

Table of Means and Standard Deviations on the Social Evaluation Task (SET) for Each Subject Group across Story Vignettes

Subject Group	N	SET Ratings[a] Mean	S.D.
Non-Problem	17		
Undercontrolled Vignette		15.88	2.98
Overcontrolled Vignette		29.12	5.86
Problem	17		
Undercontrolled Vignette		11.18	2.24
Overcontrolled Vignette		27.24	7.63

[a]Maximum SET Total = 45.

main effect for subject group, further analyses were conducted in order to examine the hypothesized group differences in SET ratings for the behaviors described in the story vignettes.

An analysis of the group means for SET ratings confirmed the hypothesis for differences in ratings of the "undercontrolled" story character, t (32) = 5.21, $p < .0001$. Problem Group subjects rated the "undercontrolled" character more negatively than did their Non-Problem peers. The two groups did not differ significantly in their ratings of the "overcontrolled" character, $t(32) = 0.81$, N.S. The main effect for subject group noted earlier was therefore due primarily to the significantly more negative ratings for the "undercontrolled" character made by the Problem Group. An analysis of the main effect for story vignette indicated that the "undercontrolled" character was rated significantly more negatively than the "overcontrolled" character by both subject groups, t (16) = -7.55, $p < .0001$ (Non-Problem) ; $t(16) = 8.29$, $p < .0001$ (Problem). The main effect for story vignette was therefore significant in both subject conditions.

Causal Attribution Task (CAT)

The second series of analyses examined subjects' ratings on the three scales which comprised the Causal Attribution Task (CAT). The design for these analyses was a 2 (subject group) X 2 (story vignette) factorial with repeated measures on the story vignette factor. Subjects' mean scale ratings again served as

dependent measures for each analysis. The ratings were examined separately for the Situational (SIT), Dispositional (DIS), and Validity (VAL) Scales comprising the Causal Attribution Task.

Analysis of SIT ratings. The means and standard deviations for the SIT ratings by both groups in both story vignette conditions are found in Table 2. An analysis of variance indicated significant main effects for subject group, F (1,32) = 8.88, $p < .005$, and story vignette, F (1,32) = 16.56, $p < .0001$. The group by story interaction was not significant, F (1,32) = 0.01, N.S.

These findings indicate that on the whole the Problem Group rated the story characters higher on the Situational Scale than did the Non-Problem Group. The effect for story vignette indicated that the "undercontrolled" story character was rated higher overall on the Situational Scale than was the "overcontrolled" character. Given the significant main effect for subject group, further analyses were conducted in order to examine the hypothesized differences between the Problem and Non-Problem groups in SIT ratings for the behaviors depicted in the story vignettes.

An analysis of group means on the SIT indicated that the groups differed significantly in their ratings for the "undercontrolled" character, t (32) = 2.82, $p < .008$, and the "overcontrolled" character, t (32) = 2.30, $p < .028$. In both story conditions the Problem Group made significantly higher situational ratings than did the Non-Problem Group.

Table 2

Table of Means and Standard Deviations on the Causal Attribution Task Situational (SIT) Scale for Each Subject Group Across Story Vignettes

Subject Group	N	SIT Ratings[a] Mean	S.D.
Non-Problem	17		
Undercontrolled Vignette		16.88	3.26
Overcontrolled Vignette		14.41	3.14
Problem	17		
Undercontrolled Vignette		19.59	2.24
Overcontrolled Vignette		17.24	3.96

[a]Maximum SIT Total = 25.

Analysis of DIS ratings. The means and standard deviations for DIS ratings made by each group in both story vignette conditions appear in Table 3. An analysis of variance indicated that the main effects were not significant for subject group, F (1,32) = 0.10, N.S., or story vignette, F (1,32) =0.44, N.S. The results of the analysis for group differences in DIS ratings indicated that the Problem and Non-Problem groups did not differ significantly in their dispositional ratings for the behaviors depicted in the story vignettes.

Analysis of VAL ratings. The means and standard deviations for VAL ratings made by each group in both story vignette conditions appear in Table 4. An analysis of variance indicated that the main effects for subject group, F (1,32) = 0.30, N.S., and story vignette, F (1,32) = 0.23, N.S., were not significant. Further comparisons of group and story vignette conditions supported the intended purpose of the VAL Scale as a check on response set variance in subjects' ratings of the behaviors depicted in the story vignettes.

Table 3

Table of Means and Standard Deviations on the Causal Attribution Task Dispositional (DIS) Scale for Each Subject Group Across Story Vignettes

Subject Group	N	DIS Ratings[a] Mean	S.D.
Non-Problem	17		
Undercontrolled Vignette		14.71	3.22
Overcontrolled Vignette		14.18	2.63
Problem	17		
Undercontrolled Vignette		15.00	5.06
Overcontrolled Vignette		14.65	4.92

[a]Maximum DIS Total = 25.

Table 4

Table of Means and Standard Deviations on the Causal Attribution Task Validity (VAL) Scale for Each Subject Group Across Story Vignettes

Subject Group	N	VAL Ratings[a] Mean	S.D.
Non-Problem	17		
Undercontrolled Vignette		5.88	1.50
Overcontrolled Vignette		5.82	1.78
Problem	17		
Undercontrolled Vignette		5.71	1.16
Overcontrolled Vignette		5.53	1.23

[a]Maximum VAL Total = 25.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study indicated that the groups differed significantly in their social evaluations and causal attributions concerning the behavior disorders depicted in the hypothetical story vignettes. Problem Group youngsters were significantly more negative in their evaluations of the "undercontrolled" character than their Non-Problem peers. The "overcontrolled" character was rated significantly more positive overall than the "undercontrolled" character. Both subject groups made significantly higher situational ratings for the "undercontrolled" versus the "overcontrolled" story character. Problem Group youngsters were found to make significantly higher situational ratings for both story characters than their Non-Problem peers.

A plausible explanation for the group difference in social evaluation ratings may be that conduct problem children are "biased" in their evaluations of oppositional, "anti-social" behavior patterns, resulting in more negative ratings than are produced by their better-adjusted peers. Several recent investigations of "attributional bias" have suggested that conduct problem children are prone to be systematically biased in their attributions for the behaviors or intentions of peers, in the direction of presumed hostility (Dodge, 1980; Dodge & Frame, 1982; Nasby, Hayden, & DePaulo, 1980). That is, conduct problem children attribute negative, hostile intentions to other children with greater frequency than do better-adjusted, "non-problem" youths.

The findings with regard to the higher situational ratings made by both subject groups for the "undercontrolled" character supported previous research with normal children (Maas, Marecek, & Travers, 1978). The more clinically suggestive finding that Problem Group subjects made significantly higher situational ratings for both story characters than did their non-problem peers also seems interpretable within the "attributional bias" framework. That is, it may be that the attributional bias discussed earlier for conduct problem children involves a more specific "situational bias" for explaining oppositional, "anti-social" behavior in mostly external, situational terms. Numerous theoretical reviews of childhood behavior disorders have described the common tendency of conduct problem children to "avoid responsibility" (Redl, 1976), or to place responsibility on others for their own interpersonal conflicts (Redl & Wineman, 1952; Rutter, 1975).

The findings of the present study briefly summarized here would suggest that the clinical application of research in children's social cognition indeed represents a viable course on which future explorations should embark.

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Appendix A: Story Vignettes

TANE

We'll call this student TANE. TANE seems to do whatever he wants at anytime and doesn't seem to care whether it's right or wrong. TANE also doesn't seem to care whether he gets into trouble for anything he has done. At school, TANE often gets into fights and arguments with other kids, although he does have a few friends. TANE will often yell or get angry at the teacher. He loses his temper very easily and will even break things or throw things if he's mad enough. One minute, TANE might seem calm and the next minute seem very angry. He might be nice to somebody and then soon after might get angry at that person or start bothering them for no reason at all. Sometimes, he does things to scare other people or make them unhappy. TANE doesn't seem to care about other people's feelings or what other people think about him. He is often in trouble with his teachers, who seem to have a lot of trouble controlling him.

BLEEN

We'll call this student BLEEN. BLEEN seems afraid to talk to people or to make any friends. He often stays at home rather than playing outside with the other kids in the neighborhood. In school, BLEEN usually sits alone at lunchtime, or if he's with other kids, he hardly says anything. BLEEN doesn't usually play with other kids during free time or recess, and really doesn't have any close friends. Sometimes, BLEEN thinks other kids are making fun of him or saying nasty things about him even though they're really not. He seems to cry very easily and is nervous most of the time. BLEEN never raises his hand in class and gets embarrassed when the teacher calls on him. Many time, BLEEN seems to be in a world all his own, talking to himself, and not paying much attention to what's going on around him.

Appendix B: Social Evaluation Task

	Very	A Little	In-Between	A Little	Very	
1. FRIENDLY	____	____	____	____	____	UNFRIENDLY
2. HONEST	____	____	____	____	____	DISHONEST
3. POLITE	____	____	____	____	____	IMPOLITE
4. HELPFUL	____	____	____	____	____	UNHELPFUL
5. THOUGHTFUL	____	____	____	____	____	CRUEL
6. NICE	____	____	____	____	____	MEAN
7. GOOD	____	____	____	____	____	BAD
8. KIND	____	____	____	____	____	UNKIND
9. FAIR	____	____	____	____	____	UNFAIR

(Ss will complete two SETs, one for each vignette.)

	Very Likely	More Likely than Unlikely	In-Between	More Unlikely than Likely	Very Unlikely
1. He just likes to be that way.	___	___	___	___	___
2. He eats Wheaties for breakfast.	___	___	___	___	___
3. He's been like that all his life.	___	___	___	___	___
4. He's disturbed about something.	___	___	___	___	___
5. Darth Vadar makes him that way.	___	___	___	___	___
6. He was born that way.	___	___	___	___	___
7. He's angry about something.	___	___	___	___	___
8. He's an only child.	___	___	___	___	___
9. He has problems at home that make him that way.	___	___	___	___	___
10. He wears sneakers to school.	___	___	___	___	___
11. That's just the way he is.	___	___	___	___	___
12. His feet are too big.	___	___	___	___	___
13. He's taking after his friends.	___	___	___	___	___
14. There's something wrong with him.	___	___	___	___	___
15. He's too tall.	___	___	___	___	___

(Ss will complete two CATs, one for each vignette.)